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## The One That Got Away: Elizabeth Bishop's "damned 'Fish'"

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Everyone who writes about Elizabeth Bishop's poems must comment on her "powers of observation." It's a rule. Randall Jarrell's famous early review remains one of the pithiest of these comments: "All her poems have written underneath *I have seen it*" (235). And many critics, before and since Jarrell, base their readings of Bishop's poems on the assumption of her realism. Lloyd Frankenberg writes, "hers is a clearly delineated world" of "perception[,] precision, compression" (331, 333). Walker Percy argues that the true subject of her poetry is the act of perception itself (14). Frank Bidart in his tribute to Bishop writes, "I'm scared of observing as much as Miss Bishop does" and discusses the "drama of perception" lying beneath her exact descriptions. The staggering amount of concrete, evocative, careful details in her poems, the way her poems make any reader see the world she describes, calls attention to her as an observer. But the emphasis and overemphasis on Bishop's "powers of observation" has become a real hindrance to understanding many of her poems, including some of those most anthologized and discussed. Reading Bishop's poems as tiny verbal recreations of the world she sees reduces her accomplishment to the "typically female art of the miniature" (McNeil 397) and makes of her poems little dollhouses without threat or interest. Any number of critics have taken that next step, from reading Bishop as a careful observer to seeing her as a miniaturist, merely imitating stilled scenes perfectly but without imagination. Andrew Motion argues that Bishop "transforms things which are dangerously

proliferative and random into contained visions of themselves" (313). Spiegelman claims, "We do not normally think of Bishop as a poet of struggle; the tension in her poems is mostly internalized, and confrontations, when they occur, are between the self, traveling, moving, or simply seeing, and the landscape it experiences" (169).

Spiegelman's statement points up exactly the problem with overemphasizing detail at the expense of the whole poem; we lose the struggle, the play between the observer and the observed, that is at the heart of Bishop's relationship to perception and to questions of human connection to some external world. Denis Donoghue acknowledges this when he writes that "the received sense of Bishop's work, so far as I can judge it, makes her poetry sound far more domestic than it is" (246). The details in Bishop's poems "rarely coincide with the evidence to which they testify." Again and again, Bishop questions the human ability to see the world in a way that is both accurate and meaningful; she questions the ability of the senses to apprehend their surroundings and the function of human imagination in the context of perception. One of the best examples of these questions of perception, this proliferation and ultimate failure of detail, is "The Fish." It is also one of the poems most often quoted to tout Bishop's triumph as an "observer," an embroiderer of the "real" world into some poetic tapestry.

"The Fish" has already become a classic, one of Bishop's most well-known and widely anthologized poems. In a letter to Robert Lowell of February 27, 1970, Bishop writes:

I think I'll try to turn that damned "Fish" into a sonnet, or something very short and quite different. (I seem to get requests for it every day for anthologies with titles like *Reading as Experience* or *Experience as Reading*, each anthologizer insisting that he is doing something completely different from every other anthologizer. But I'm sure this is an old story to you.) (Quoted in Giroux 515)

Bishop's comic anthology titles suggest the way that readers have tended to see "The Fish": as a recreation of experience, a triumph of exact observation, rather than an exploration and comment on perception, the act of perceiving, and even perhaps the impossibility of perceiving at all. Instead of offering us a miniature fish, Bishop offers us a complex consideration of our own longing for an impossible empirical connection to the world beyond the self.

To come to understand this complex consideration, we must first understand that, on a literal level, the poem is all wrong. The whole experience is impossible. A student of mine, Nathan Tanner, who was a first mate on a fishing charter and an accomplished fisherman, first brought to my attention the impossibility of the experience Bishop chronicles in "The Fish." He told me that he could not write a discussion paragraph about the poem because he hated it; I told him to write about why he hated it. Nathan hated it for the same reasons that most critics liked it: the observations. They were, he said — and I confirmed this information — all wrong. "He was speckled with barnacles": no fish can have barnacles; barnacles can grow on whales because whales are mam-

mals but fish have a protective layer of mucous that prevents barnacles from adhering to their skin. "I looked into his eyes / which were far larger than mine": no one can hold a fish with an eye larger than a human eye half out of water beside a little rented fishing boat without toppling into the water. To hold a fish of this size out of the water would require fifty-pound rigging at least. "With all their five big hooks / grown firmly in his mouth": five hooks cannot grow firmly into the mouth of a fish. In salt water, metal hooks rust and dissolve within days.

How do we make this information coincide with Bishop's well-documented "powers of observation"? Did she just get the details wrong, even though she lived and fished in Key West for years? Did she misremember the experience, even though she actually did catch this fish and, by her own account, eat it? I doubt it. I think the problem is not with the poem but with our usual reading of the poem as realistic, as an attempt at representing a real experience. Instead of a record of experience, "The Fish" is a fable. In fact, from the very first words, the poem invokes the fable tradition in its most basic form: it tells a fish story. However, the fish story in this poem is an inverted one; the normal sequence in which the inconceivably enormous fish and the brave fisherman fight fiercely until the fish "gets away" is replaced by one in which an obviously female speaker fights a mental and spiritual battle to "see" the fish and describe him, a struggle for empirical understanding that replaces the physical struggle to land him while still evoking the latter struggle's terms of domination and perhaps even death.

The repetition of the pronoun "he" in the first lines of the poem emphasizes the degree to which the speaker imposes a human identity on the fish, as she battles and "he" refuses the challenge:

I caught a tremendous fish  
and held him beside the boat  
half out of water, with my hook  
fast in a corner of his mouth.  
He didn't fight.  
He hadn't fought at all.  
He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable  
and homely. (1-9)

This insistence on the pronoun "he" alerts us to the fact that, in order to make the fish, and the struggle to land him, meaningful in human terms, the speaker has anthropomorphized the fish. The fish has been drawn (both literally and metaphorically) into the speaker's world and into the speaker's perspective. The adjectives that the speaker attaches to the fish all emphasize this removal and replacement. "Battered" suggests the violent nature of the fish's contact with the human realm. "Venerable" and "homely" both reveal the aspect of the fish through the lens of the human eye and its emotional attachment, a lens through which all information about the world beyond the self must pass. But the fish has disappointed the speaker and the speaker's expectations, has immediately

challenged her preconceived notions of the “correct” fable by *refusing* to fight. The fish’s apparent refusal is a construction based on the speaker’s desire to fight with the fish, to have a moment of struggle that is meaningful in terms of the human fable. This desire for meaning also inheres in her desire to “see” the fish, to “land” it in a metaphorical sense. In an effort to do this, the speaker in the poem moves across a perceptual spectrum, from an objective view that attempts to catalog detail but will not (or does not want to) suggest human meaning, to a subjective view that allows emotional connection to create a more anthropomorphized version of the fish that is capable of communicating human meaning but will not (or does not want to) catalog sensuous detail. Obviously, no human can reach absolutes moving between these poles; we cannot see a reality not brought to us by human senses, nor can we apprehend ourselves as subject without some object. In fact, it is this indeterminacy within perception that the poem explores and emphasizes. These two poles of human perception, though they represent useful and worthy ways of seeing in many different situations, also indicate the potential for play, the unstable and often elusive quality of perceiving the material world beyond the self.

The result of this modulation between subjective and objective in the poem is that the fish becomes “fabulous.” It becomes, like the gingerbread house in “Hansel and Gretel” or (even more) like the talking fish in the Grimms’ Brothers tale, both impossible and real enough to eat. The modulation, the movement between real and unreal (or surreal) detail, means that the poem presents the fish neither as a representative of the “ultimate outsider” — a projection of the “other” to be admired but never understood — nor as emblematic of the self — a projection of personal fears and desires. Instead, the speaker seems to vacillate between these possibilities, holding the fish and the reader in a kind of perceptual balance, countering objectivity and sentimentality:

Here and there  
his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:  
shapes like full-blown roses  
stained and lost through age.  
He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime,  
and infested  
with tiny white sea-lice,  
and underneath two or three  
ragged green weed hung down. (9-21)

The similes “like ancient wallpaper” and “like full-blown roses” drag the fish into the human world by force of comparison, but though they seem to help us to see the fish on one level (we can picture what it looks “like”), on another level the similes distort; the fish gets away. The comparisons in the similes combine with the inaccurate observation of the barnacles and the green weed hanging

down to create a sense of something awry, perilously awry, a strangeness in this most domestic fish story. What we see is real but impossible. We see the fish through the speaker's imagination and suddenly realize, like Hansel and Gretel, that we have wandered into the woods and are faced with something at once pleasing, terrifying and out of the question. In one way, Bishop does in these lines what Donoghue notices throughout her work; she "patiently engag[es] with the otherness of the natural world, drawing it, by the force of provisional comparison, toward the world she already knows" (250). On another level, however, the provisional comparison itself breaks down; the world she knows gets mixed up in a world she imagines, a world that she makes real for both herself and for us but that none of us can physically see. The description of the fish is "askew" in the sense in which Prunty uses the word: the similitude both "likens and also opens up a gap" (193).

The modulation between subjective and objective description becomes, in the lines that follow, a vacillation between perspectives in the poem, between the fish's perspective, so far as it can be imagined — "his gills were breathing in / the terrible oxygen" — and the human perspective — "the frightening gills, / fresh and crisp with blood, / that can cut so badly" (21-6). This back and forth, this play of the imagination, expresses both the speaker's desire to see the fish and her desire to make the story, the fable, meaningful. The mention of "the frightening gills . . . that can cut so badly" marks a new movement in the poem, as if the mention of the wound, the vulnerable reality of the human body, propels the speaker to a consideration of the internal reality of this other body, whose "insides," hidden from view, must be created by the imagination rather than by any empirical examination. They are, as Bishop says in "The Monument" (an earlier poem from *North & South*), "what is within (which after all / cannot have been intended to be seen)" (76-7). The internal world that we move into is as fabulous and awry as the external one we have left. When we go inside in Bishop's poems — into the monument as above, into the interior in "Arrival at Santos," into an inscrutable house in "Sestina" — the danger always increases. McNeil, speaking of "The Monument" suggests that "perhaps the signifying structure also has an inside and an outside, like the body" (406). The fish, like both the monument and the gingerbread house from the German folktale, is a signifying structure, but it is also a creature and not a made thing, like house or monument. Still though, the speaker and the reader are drawn inward, and it is this movement into the other body that represents both the utter loss of sensuous reality and the deepest moment of connection:

I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,  
and the pink swim-bladder  
like a big peony. (27-33)

"In" is a central concept throughout Bishop's work. In her short story "In Prison," the speaker says, "One must be *in*; that is the primary condition" (182).

At the end of "Arrival at Santos," the tourist/speaker says cheerfully and ominously, "we are driving to the interior" (40), just as the caravels in "Brazil, January 1, 1502" are being drawn into the interior by the "maddening little women" who are "retreating, always retreating" (51, 53). Over and over again in Bishop's work being "in" represents both the greatest hope for understanding and connection and the most frightening moment of self-annihilation. Donoghue sees the preposition "in" becoming, for Bishop, the entire presence/absence dichotomy, representing both the interiority of mind and the loss of self and beloved people and places (247). In "The Fish," going "in," imagining one's way into this other body, is even more perilously askew than any attempt at describing the outside. Again, as in the earlier description, similes draw what we cannot see or know toward the seen and known; the white flesh "packed in like feathers" is both convincing and impossible. The stunning description of the "swim-bladder / like a big peony" illustrates the drama that Bishop herself reads into the fish in "dramatic reds and blacks," a drama that itself cannot be seen or known.

However, this going "in" is also oddly transformational. From this point on, a new awareness suffuses the poem and Bishop repeats over and over the verbs of visual attention: "I looked," "I admired," "I saw," and most importantly, "I stared." Her reference to the fish's eyes connects her perspective to the fish's while refusing to anthropomorphize the creature. Here the speaker seems to test the range of the powers of human observation, moving between a sentimental view, a view capable of assigning emotional meaning but one that fails to differentiate between self and not-self, and an objective view, that risks the scientific belief in the report of the senses, that posits human ability to observe disinterestedly. However, Bishop finally avoids either sentimental self-projection or scientific distance. Instead, she draws a fabulous fish through an escape not *from* but *through* the empirical, into the imaginative:

I looked into his eyes  
 which were far larger than mine  
 but shallower, and yellowed,  
 the irises backed and packed  
 with tarnished tinfoil  
 seen through the lenses  
 of old scratched isinglass.  
 They shifted a little, but not  
 to return my stare.  
 — It was more like the tipping  
 of an object toward the light. (34-44)

The isinglass recalls the lens of human perspective, the action of the human senses on the material world, and also refers to the fish, both directly, because isinglass resembles the lens of his eye, and indirectly, because isinglass is made from fish bladder. Going "in," all the way in, allows a perspective that is imaginative, that escapes the objective/subjective polarity by being both meaningful and true. I believe this is the perspective of the fabulous.

One good way to demonstrate that the fish is fabulous is to hold it beside the Man-Moth. Bishop's Man-Moth is clearly a fabled creature, deriving from a newspaper misprint for "mammoth" combined with Bishop's imaginative love of surprise. Like "The Fish," "The Man-Moth" explores the battle between the individual and the contingent world and questions human perception. The speaker of "The Man-Moth" speaks from the "Here, above," the realm not of the Man-Moth but of the other fabled creature with whom the Man-Moth is contrasted: Man. Man and Man-Moth gain identity through their differing reactions to their surroundings, their perceptions and their failure to perceive. Like the fish, Man and Man-Moth both require the reader to enter them imaginatively in order to understand them; they require of us an act of deliberate complicity in imaginative creation.

In the first part of the poem, Man seems to stand outside imaginative perception. He belongs to a world that is closed to him because he fails to show enough interest to pay attention to any phenomena other than those that touch him directly:

He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,  
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,  
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers. (6-8)

All the questioning of the empirical that is implicit in "The Fish" is explicit here: Man "does not see" because he is too busy observing the moon's "vast properties." He can feel only what seems to come into contact with his body and then experiences that light as "neither warm nor cold." He is caught in a polarized perception. In direct contrast, the Man-Moth becomes a kind of poet who can escape the poles of human perception by an act of imaginative connection. He not only sees the moon but feels compelled to risk himself in order to investigate its true nature:

the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges  
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks  
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.  
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,  
proving the sky quite useless for protection.  
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb. (11-16)

The Man-Moth's belief that the immensity of the sky could be punctured, that the moon is not an object but an opening, makes his reality much more precarious than Man's, since it allows the possibility that other boundaries, like the body, could also be "quite useless for protection."

As a fabled figure, the Man-Moth, like the fish, is drawn into the human world and somehow also draws that world to himself. In the final stanza, the distance between Man and Man-Moth, this boundary that the poem has carefully constructed, proves permeable. Addressed to the readers in the second person, readers suddenly stand in for the mythic Man:



If you catch him,  
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,  
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens  
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids  
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.  
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention  
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,  
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink. (41-8)

Here Man and Man-Moth suddenly partake of each other in the same sort of moment that the fish and the fisherwoman experience in "The Fish." It is a moment of potential domination — an almost sexual penetration — but one that involves an act of imaginative rather than actual entering. The Man-Moth's tear connects it directly and obviously to other mythical creatures, such as genies and leprechauns, who must surrender their treasure when sought or summoned. However, the suggestion that the tear must be drunk, that the other must be internalized to be really "caught," connects the Man-Moth with the fish and with a whole pattern of images in Bishop's work that involve abolishing the self in order to preserve it (Motion 322).

On August 21, 1947, Lowell wrote Bishop from Yaddo and complimented her on "The Fish": "I'm glad you wrote me because it gives me an excuse to tell you how much I liked your New Yorker Fish Poem. Perhaps its your best. Anyway I felt very envious in reading it. I'm a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols alas" (6). In "The Fish," Bishop creates an entity that is two things at the same time, both symbol and fish. It will not, as Lowell says, "become" a symbol because Bishop endows it with so much detail, so much of the evidence we rely on to know. She makes her reader see the fish. However, the detail with which Bishop endows the fish is meaningful rather than empirically real. In fact, the repeated verbs of observation eventually succeed not in "seeing" the fish, either subjectively or objectively, but in allowing the speaker to take the fish inside herself, to internalize it, through the force of her scrutiny and her attempt at empathy. The riveting visual exactness of Bishop's description of the "five old pieces of fish line" (51) makes what she sees seem absolutely real and convincing to us, even though it is impossible. This is exactly the way any good fable functions: we believe in the world we have entered with all its beauties and dangers; even though we have no material evidence of candy houses or wicked witches or talking fish, we can create them imaginatively.

When Bishop moves from the exact description of the imagined fishline to a metaphorical comparison that makes the imagined more and more real, she insistently draws the world of the fish into her own reality, internalizes the other, rather than projecting the known onto the unknown:

from his lower lip  
— if you could call it a lip —  
grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line,

or four and a wire leader  
 with the swivel still attached,  
 with all their five big hooks  
 grown firmly in his mouth.  
 A green line, frayed at the end  
 where he broke it, two heavier lines,  
 and a fine black thread  
 still crimped from the strain and snap  
 when it broke and he got away.  
 Like medals with their ribbons  
 frayed and wavering,  
 a five-haired beard of wisdom  
 trailing from his aching jaw. (48-64)

Bishop has created a fish that balances between two worlds. It is neither a "real" fish — that is, an accurate representation of a fish — nor an anthropomorphized fish; it is "half out of water" and half submerged. By making the fish fabulous, the speaker simultaneously moves out of the self and into the fish and pulls the fish into her world, creating a moment of epiphany, of connection — a victory. It is, as Prunty says, a "relational victory" (249), in the sense that no single perspective, objective or subjective, and no single actor, fish or woman, wins. The victory that fills "the little rented boat," like the fish itself, is fabulous, unascribed and unascrivable; everything has won. The image of the "little rented boat," however, also reveals how brief, how transitory this victory is. Victory is won by a precarious balance forged by the imagination, by the impossible made imaginatively real for an instant. This might remind us of the talking fish from the Grimm's Tale who says, "Fisherman, fisherman, you've caught enough. Lots and lots of tasty fishes. If you set me free, I'll grant you some wishes" ("Grimm's"). In both fables, catching the fish and setting it free mean that both fish and fisherman get what they want; the victory is universal.

In the image of the rainbow, the sun hitting the pool of bilge, Bishop again creates extraordinary beauty out of the terribly transitory and apparently ugly sensuous reality. In the final lines of the poem, all contingent reality is briefly transfigured by the victory that the fabled fish affords. The lines between the world that can be sensed and the world that can only be imagined blur:

I stared and stared  
 and victory filled up  
 the little rented boat,  
 from the pool of bilge  
 where oil had spread a rainbow  
 around the rusted engine  
 to the bailer rusted orange,  
 the sun cracked thwarts,  
 the oarlocks on their strings,  
 the gunnels — until everything  
 was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
 And I let the fish go. (65-76)

Although Robert Dale Parker objects to what he calls the “cheerily sentimental word rainbow,” saying it “violates the modesty and indirection that [Bishop] was to win such admiration for” (58), the image of the rainbow and Bishop’s ecstatic repetition of the word encompass the entire theme of the poem and close the fable effectively. Like the fish itself, the rainbow cannot exist except in the eyes of the perceiver. A rainbow is a phenomenon created by human vision, not by external reality; nevertheless, we see it, just as we see Bishop’s impossible fish. Physically, then, the rainbow is a sign of an internal or invisible condition. In the Judeo-Christian tradition of Noah’s Flood, the rainbow became the symbol of both the great destruction of the world by water and the restoration of the divine covenant with the faithful: a transient image of a lasting promise.

In many fables, animals speak and act like human beings, and this is because human beings create the narrative and human eyes draw the world into their gaze, into their world. Like all fables, Bishop’s imparts a useful truth. At the end of the poem, the world becomes “rainbow” because the speaker sees rainbows. The rainbow is an arch that connects the world of the “other,” represented by the fish, to the human world. The real fish escapes her boat, her scrutiny, her structure — her flawed and fabulous vision of it. But the rainbow remains, reminding us, perhaps, that the fish, too, remains in the poem as a creature of fable, neither recognizably human nor recognizably fish. Bishop’s fish is not *a* fish; it is *the* fish.

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